

Nations in social LCA

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Social life cycle assessment (SLCA) aims to assess the social aspects of products along their life cycle. The UNEP/SETAC guide to SLCA (Benoît and Mazijn 2009) focuses on the social performance of the unit processes in the life cycle and on the production sites and companies to which these unit processes belong. The role and performance of the company is also the focus of the social sustainability indicators previously suggested by Labuschagne and Brent (2006), in the framework for SLCA presented by Dreyer et al. (2006), and in the social indicators proposed by Hutchins and Sutherland (2008). Schmidt et al. (2004) and Hunkeler (2006) focus on the socioeconomic benefits of the income generated through the product life cycle.

However, it is reasonable to expand the methodology to account also for the social performance of the government or other social aspects of the country where the product is produced. Such information has proven to be relevant at all levels of decision making. It has, for example, many times affected decisions of consumers as individuals or groups:

- Gasoline from Shell Oil Company was the target of a boycott in the 1980s because of its involvement in South Africa during the time of apartheid (Washington Post 1988),
- Don't! Buy! Thai! was a campaign initiated in the early 1990s to boycott goods and services produced in Thailand until its government introduced formal and practical reforms to significantly curtail the prostitution of children (Wikipedia 2010a),

- Israeli products have been boycotted because of policies or actions towards the Palestinians; however, Israeli products have also been boycotted, i.e., the target of active campaigns to buy the products (Wikipedia 2010b),
- Maroc oranges have been boycotted because of the occupation by Morocco of Western Sahara, and
- in 2006, Muslim consumers boycotted Danish goods and also products from the Danish/Swedish dairy company Arla Foods (Wikipedia 2010c) because the Danish government refused to condemn the publication of satirical Muhammad cartoons in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten.

The list of similar consumer decisions can be made much longer. Note that a consumer boycott of a company is not always because of poor performance of the company itself. As demonstrated by the case of Arla Foods, the company can be merely regarded as a symbol of the country where it resides; the focus of the consumers is on the country or the performance of the government.

At the other end of the decision-maker scale, countries, groups of countries, and the United Nations (UN) have also taken actions against other countries for social reasons. The UN sanctions against South Africa during the time of apartheid are a notable example. A more recent case is the sanctions imposed by the European Union, United States of America, and Canada on the junta of Burma (Wikipedia 2010d).

The decisions above have all been made without a social LCA. On the surface, no life cycle study is needed to know if a product has the Arla brand or is produced in Israel. However, if raw material from one country is processed into a finished product in another country, the decision is less clearcut. Such a case is when oranges from Morocco are exported to produce juice, lemonade, or carbonated soft

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drinks elsewhere. A consumer or organization committed to the situation in Western Sahara might need a quantitative life cycle approach to decide which, if any, of these drinks to avoid. A jeweler might also need a quantitative life cycle study to investigate and communicate to which extent the jewelry contains rubies from Burma. An SLCA could assist in such cases.

To account for the social performance of governments and countries in an SLCA, approaches have to be developed within the general framework of SLCA: indicators, units of measurements, and data sources will have to be found. Decision makers in different contexts are not likely to agree on what aspects are important, and no global consensus can be expected even on what is socially good or bad. This is illustrated by the differing views on Israel and also on the controversy over the Muhammad cartoons.

To suggest indicators for the assessment, it is still useful to note that the decisions above are all reactions to perceived oppression. In most of these cases, governments are an active part in the oppression of its population or of that in a disputed area; in the case of Denmark, though, the perceived oppression was in the form of allowing newspapers to go unpunished in their smearing of the religious Muslims. In the case of boycotting of Israeli products, Israel is the perceived target for oppression from the rest of the world.

Since oppression on a national level is a common factor, it seems reasonable to select one or several indicators related to this for the SLCA. Such indicators can probably be relevant for decision makers in many contexts. At the simplest level, it could be sufficient to focus on the issue of democracy and distinguish between countries that are free, partly free, or not free, as explicitly listed by, e.g., Freedom House (FH 2010a and 2010b). In an SLCA, this freedom indicator can be related to the product through the value added to the product in each specific country. If a positive indicator is used, it can be measured in terms of value added in free countries. Value added in partly free countries can then be included in the calculation at half value. If a negative freedom indicator is used, the calculation includes the value added in countries that are not free plus half the value added in partly free countries. This approach will describe to what extent the product contributes to economies in countries that are politically free (or not free).

Input to more detailed indicators regarding oppression on a national level might be found from, for example, Human Rights Watch (e.g., HRW 2010) or Amnesty International (e.g., AI 2010).

The freedom indicators above, as well as more detailed indicators related to oppression, can be adequate for attributional SLCA, because they give information on to what extent the product and, hence, its buyer is associated with undemocratic or otherwise undesirable political systems (cf. Ekvall et al. 2005). When used in consequential studies the indicators will be crude measures at best, unless causal relations are identified between the money flowing into the country and the continuation of the oppression.

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